

hi-fi news

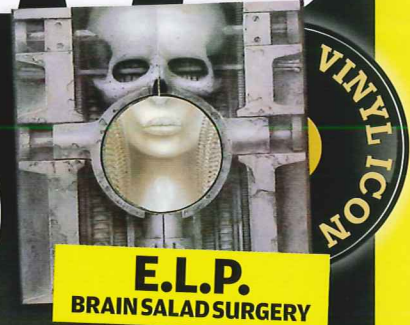
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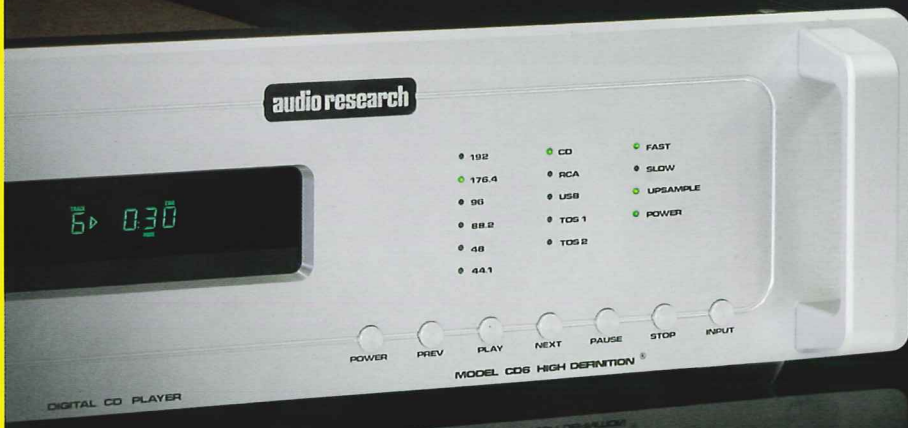
POWER TRIO

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Budget Esoterica
Cambridge Audio 651C
'You can't go to Garrard now!'
Vintage restorers, p14

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Sonus faber Olympica III

Another all-new range from Italy's leading speaker maker, Olympica's top model is the commanding III floorstander
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

With so many families in the Sonus faber catalogue, it's hard to figure where Olympica fits. The top of the range III sells for £9400 per pair in natural walnut or anthracite, while the range starts with the small two-way Olympica I at £4398, and there's the II in the middle at £6998, so they overlap with Cremona and Homage. That said, they boast interesting details to separate them from their older siblings while they also exhibit a return to, and refine, the design language that made Sonus faber the most influential speaker brand of the past three decades.

The Olympica range is named after one of the greatest works designed by the legendary architect Andrea Palladio, and constructed in 1580-85 as a gift to the city of Vicenza, the Teatro Olimpico. Sonus faber's tribute is a line of speakers conceived to reflect the Palladian virtues of 'planning, harmony, proportions', and a 'search for beauty [and] wonder'. Tempering the aesthetic concerns, of course, are audio considerations: accessing the listener's emotions through a lifelike portrayal of the music.

In citing Palladio, Sonus faber specifically calls our attention to his theatre's *sonic* qualities, the company long practicing the use of accurate reference models of acoustic enhancement and the concomitant environments in which they'll be used. This is a tradition started by the late founder, Franco Serblin, who was unafraid to insist on, for example, extreme toe-in to create what he described as a 'proscenium effect' around the speakers.

In addition to the lofty aims of using Palladio as a muse, Sonus faber has played to its own strengths, expressed in the company's mission statement, citing a desire to offer its clients, 'a range of models so that everyone can find the right solution in terms of use and in terms of space'. To realise this, the Italians had to

make something that, by any definition, was utterly stunning to gaze upon.

WOOD AND LEATHER LUXURY

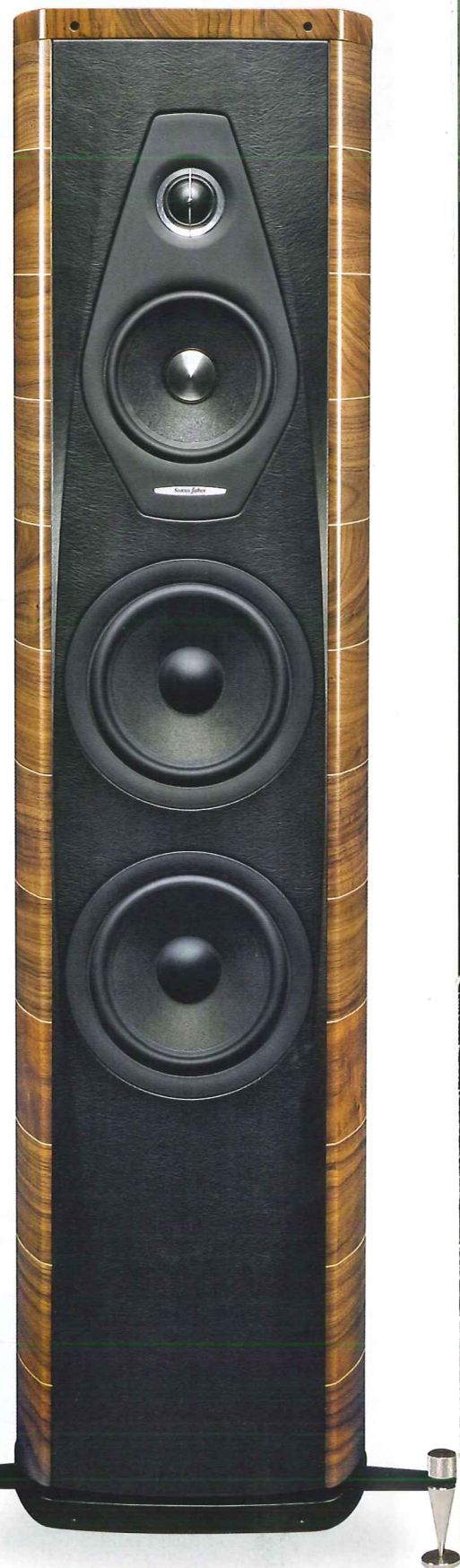
Standing 1114mm in height and weighing a thought-provoking 88kg, the Olympica III is imposing without being a room-dominator. As expected, the speaker suggests fine furniture, the review example arriving in natural walnut, with the top and bottom in solid walnut and joints in clear maple. Accenting this, and adding a sense of the atmosphere within a limousine, are leather inlays with highlighted stitching and a branded Sonus faber logo; the front baffle is covered in the same natural hide. The back is also covered in leather, with countersunk serial number tags, followed by the beautifully-appointed terminals.

The construction comprises 'progressive thickness' triple curvature cabinet walls, with solid walnut clamps reinforcing the structure. For treble duties, Sonus faber has fitted its now-familiar 29mm 'Arrow Point' Damped Apex Dome, described as 'a synthesis of the classic dome and ring transducer', with neodymium magnet. The technology is derived from the much dearer Aida [see *HFN* Apr '12].

Mids are handled by a 150mm midwoofer, designed by Sonus faber, with a special custom-made diaphragm employing a 'real-time, air-dried non-pressed blend of traditional cellulose pulp, kapok, kenaf and other natural fibres'. The cone is then treated with a transparent viscous surface damping coating.

Among the most impressive of the Olympica III's virtues is bass with a richness, a fullness and a sense of scale that warrants special mention. The lower octaves are delivered by a brace of Sonus faber

RIGHT: Gorgeous wood, with metal and leather accents embracing the company's signature 'lyre' cross-section. Pairs are supplied mirror-imaged



A RETURN TO FORM

Spotting the Olympicas at a hi-fi show, one seasoned pro said, 'Finally, some Italian-made Sonus fabers.' While this ignored the massive flagship The Sonus faber, Aida and Homage models, it was a barb about the hugely successful, but cheaper models in the (award-winning) Venere range. But I understood his remark, because the Italian brand has been pumping out product like the world is about to end. Olympica heralds a return to the days when Sonus faber wasn't just a pretty face: it was a hot and sexy siren that delivered what its curves promised. Two hours after setting them up, my listening room smelled like I was in Stefano Bemer's ordering bespoke shoes. They oozed 'Italy', 'craftsmanship', 'luxury'. Far be it for me to whine because Sonus faber is now a thrusting company in the manner of 21st century commerce. But as one who has championed the marque since I first laid eyes on a pair of Minimas, hearing Olympica IIIs was like a school reunion – only nobody had turned grey or put on weight.

W18XTR woofers, said to descend from 9in units found in the Aida. Their construction includes sandwich cones using a rigid syntactic foam and treated cellulose pulp.

While these are instantly recognisable as Sonus fabers thanks to the oft-copied 'lyre' shape, the eagle-eyed will note the unusual side-firing 'Stealth Ultraflex' reflex port running the height of the speaker, trimmed with a perforated metal sheet. The speakers are supplied in mirror-image pairs, but neither is specifically 'left' or 'right'.

Depending on tastes, room size and other considerations, you might opt for these side-firing ports to fire inwards or, as in my room, firing outwards towards the side walls.

SOUND COHERENCE

Driven by an Audio Research REF75 power amplifier [HFN Nov '12], REF5SE preamplifier, SME Model 30/12 turntable/arm and Kiseki Blue feeding an EAT E-Glo phono stage, with a Marantz CD-12/DA-12 handling digital duties, these new Sonus fabers proved instantly inviting. No, make that 'irresistibly welcoming'.

In more ways than one, it was like running into an old friend. I must have used 20 or so pairs of Sonus fabers during my career, following their evolution to what I consider the high point: the Stradivarius Homage. But that was some time ago, and the latest sonic iteration of that speaker is more likely to

be found in a Serblin Ktama. Instead, the Olympica III takes the merits of a Cremona or Amati and adds greater precision, cavernous, almost limitless bass and a sense of freedom to models that were, in any case, hardly lacking in those areas.

If I had to use a single term to describe the overall sensation, it would be 'coherence'. However much you can pick apart the sound and isolate specific areas, not least being the natural, convincing bass, you will always return to the notion

that the speaker remains perfectly balanced. I could discuss the exquisitely sharp and fast treble in isolation, bang on further about the bass, talk about the vista-like quality of the

'The Sonus faber Olympica IIIs proved irresistibly welcoming.'

soundstage, but that would be a pointillist approach that does a disservice to the masterly cohesion. The sound through the Olympica III truly merits the description of 'as a whole'.

My first test for the speaker was easy: the gorgeous, silky, inviting 'My Baby Just Cares For Me,' from Nina Simone's phenomenal debut, *Little Girl Blue* [Verse Music Group BCP 6028]. Impressively, it was recorded in 1958 but it sounds as good as anything of a younger vintage you may care to compare it to.

That signature song features her sublime piano playing and a lean-but-purposeful backing of drums and bass. The sense of a small club suddenly popping up in one's listening room is exactly the effect desired of a high-end system fed by this CD. With the piano rolling under her smoky vocals, the percussion to the right and at the back, piano occupying the centre of the listening area, and the bass creating a perfect foundation, the results were enthralling. ↻

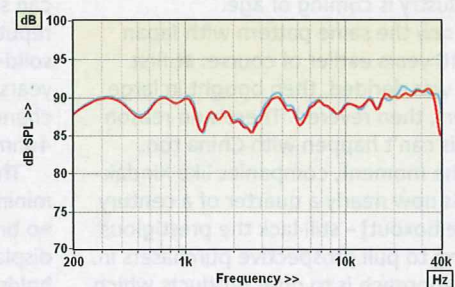


SONUS FABER OLYMPICA III

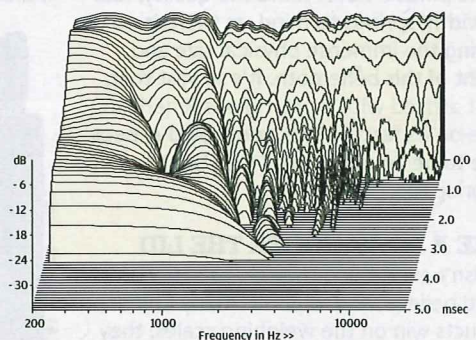
Sonus faber claims a 90dB 'nominal' sensitivity for the Olympia III but our pink noise figure of 88.8dB suggests that this is a little, but only a little optimistic. Low impedance is used to help achieve this – the nominal 4ohm specification should imply a minimum modulus of 3.2ohm (80% of nominal) but we recorded a dip down to 2.6ohm at 103Hz, so this is really a 3ohm design. Given that EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is typically half the minimum modulus figure, the Olympia III might have proved to be a tough load to drive but well controlled phase angles result in a minimum EPDR of 1.7ohm at 81Hz, so its partnering amplifier will be no more stressed than with many of today's floorstanders.

Measured at 1m on the tweeter axis the frequency response [Graph 1, below] has a slight presence band dip but departures from flat are constrained to ± 2.5 dB and ± 2.6 dB respectively, 200Hz-20kHz, for the review pair – excellent for a passive loudspeaker – and pair matching error over the same frequency range is also first-class at ± 0.8 dB. The long, thin 'paralaminar stealth flow' reflex port at the back of the cabinet adds some uncertainty to summing the driver and port contributions in the near-field bass measurement which may partly explain why the measured -6dB point (re. 200Hz) was at a relatively high 67Hz – a figure to be regarded with some caution.

At the other frequency extreme, ultrasonic output from the damped apex dome tweeter reaches to beyond 40kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] evinces fast initially energy decay across the spectrum but some low-level resonant hash is visible in the treble. KH



ABOVE: The Olympia III has a slight presence band dip but is essentially flat. Pair matching is excellent



ABOVE: Fast decay and no obvious bold resonance modes, but some 'hash' persists through the treble

LEFT: Ported down its length, with a quartet of multi-way binding posts at the bottom to allow for bi-wiring if so desired. Terminals are Sonus faber's proprietary type – easy to tighten properly

you can hear the pads hitting strings. You can isolate her accompanists. But never do they suffer a sonic disconnect. It was important, then, that more layered studio creations had to be tasted.

RETRIEVAL PROWESS

Matthew Sweet and Susannah Hoffs' latest duet set, *Under The Covers 3* [Floating World FEEEM5037] comprises more of their favourites, a stand-out being their rendition of the Dave Edmunds classic, composed by one E Costello, 'Girls Talk'. All jangly guitars and chiming tones and two contrasting voices: the Olympia III demonstrated a prowess with detail retrieval that I associate most closely with Wilsons, eg, the Alexias.

Their respective character traits are almost clichés, reflecting the designers' personalities. Dave Wilson is the most analytical individual I have ever met; he is discreet, understated. Italians, though impeccable arbiters of taste, tend toward the more flamboyant. Playing the speakers side by side, you could picture Ralph Lauren vs Brioni. The sound says it all.

And yet neither the Wilsons nor the Sonus fabers are so susceptible to such cheap and easy descriptions as to warrant a return to the days of 'British vs American vs German vs Japanese sound'. They differ chiefly as follows: The Wilsons convince. The Sonus fabers seduce. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

No doubt about it: Sonus faber has rediscovered its mojo, with the best speaker I've heard from it since the Stradivari – a reminder of the era of the founder, the late, lamented Franco Serblin. The sound is commanding yet capable of great delicacy, the soundstage huge, yet the imagery specific and precise. They represent to my ears an achievement to rank with the Sonus faber Amati. And yes, they're just as gorgeous.

Sound Quality: 86%



Impact? The percussion – both the more energetic moments at the keyboard and the actual drum kicks – were rendered in a wholly lifelike, convincing manner, the magic coming in the form of intimacy. Think about it: the walls of the listening room disappear to be replaced with the sound of the venue, the openness complete, yet there's Ms Simone almost close enough to touch.

Those single notes picked out at the beginning of 'Good Bait'? I tapped a few of them on the upright next to my desk just to gauge the resonance of a real piano. Damn, the Olympia IIIs have it nailed. Yes,

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.0dB/88.8dB/88.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.6ohm @ 103Hz 22.5ohm @ 2.3kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-37° @ 2.9kHz 46° @ 1.5kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 0.8 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	67Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 1.8% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD)	1114x403x508mm